

**Hon. Charan Jeath Singh**

**Minister for Multi Ethnic Affairs & Sugar Industry**

**Maiden Speech on Thursday, 16th February at first Parliament Session 2023**

**Adhyaksh Mahoday!**

**Hon. Speaker Sir!**

**(1)**

**Apni bhaashaa, apni pehchaan, aur apni sanskriti ka sammaan karte huye, aur saath hi, solah (16) saal ke baad, yeh sadan mein bhaashaa ki swatantrata ka ek baar phir se laagoo hone par, mein apne pehle bhashan ka aarambh, apni maatra bhaashaa, Hindi mein karnaa chahungaa.**

*Translation:*

Respecting my language, my identity, and my culture, and also, with the freedom of speaking in our language in the Parliament once again in force after 16 years, I would like to commence my maiden speech in my mother tongue, Hindi.

**(2)**

**Adhyaksh Mahoday, is owsar par un tamaam purvajon ko mein yaad karta hoon aur dhanyawaad karta hoon, jinhone Girmit ke samay mein atyachar aur kashta sahete huye bhi, apni pehchaan ko, mitne naheen diya.**

*Translation:*

Speaker Sir, on this occasion, I would like to remember all the ancestors and thank them, who while suffering the atrocities and affliction of the Girmit, retained their identity and did not allow it to die.

**(3)**

**Khaaskar ke mein dhanyawaad karta hoon, hamari mahila purvajon ko, jo Shakti bankar khadi raheen, aur na kewal pariwaar aur sanskriti ko sambhala, balki kheton mein kaam karke, is desh ki artha-vyavastha (economy) mein bhi bhaaree yogdaan diya.**

*Translation:*

In particular, I would like to thank the women ancestors, who stood as Shakti - power incarnate, and not only did they nurture the family and culture, they, while working tirelessly on the plantations, contributed immensely to the economy of this country.

**(4)**

**Adhyaksh Mahoday! Mein apne pita ki or se doosri peedhi ka santaan hoon, aur meree mata ki or se chauthi peedhi ka Girmitiya-vanshi hoon. Mein kewal ek safal vyaapari hi nahin hoon, balki ek safal ganna ka kisaan bheee hoon.**

*Translation:*

Mr. Speaker Sir, I am a 2nd generation descendant from my father's side. And from my mother's side, I am a 4th generation Girmitiya descendant. I am not only a successful businessman but also a successful sugarcane farmer- perhaps the only one in this House. I say this not with any pride but with humility.

**(5)**

**Jis vyosaye (industry) ko banaane ke liye, hamare purvajon ko bandhuwa mazdoor banaakar Fiji mein laaya gaya tha, mein usi vyosaye ke mantri ke roop aaj aapke saamne khadaa hoon.**

**Aur yeh mera aashwasan hai, ki mein ees vyosaye ko, jeess se hajaaron logon ki jeevika judee hui hai, isko bachaane mein, aur behtar banaane mein, main koi kamee naheen rakhunga.**

*Translation:*

The industry whose establishment saw our ancestors being brought to Fiji as bonded labourers, today, I am standing in front of you as a Minister for the same industry. This is my assurance, that I will leave no stone unturned in saving and improving this industry that provides livelihood to thousands of people.

**“Mr. Speaker Sir, I will now continue in English.**

I start by paying my deepest respect to all our people, our land, the many cultures that we share; the elders of our past, present and those emerging, who have laid or will lay the future foundations of Fiji.

Without their pioneering sacrifices and efforts, none of us would have seen the prosperity and progress nor experienced the freedoms and dignity that we now rightfully demand and deserve.

Sir, allow me to thank our President, His Excellency Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, for his most gracious address during the opening of the Parliament.

His Excellency is like a brother to me given our strong Macuata links and my intimate associations with his late father Ratu SOSO KATONIVERE. Ratu Soso was a distinguished chief of extraordinary mana and stature.

Sir, let me also put on record the sense of widespread hurt, insult and anger felt by our people in all parts of Fiji at the manner our President was attacked by the Leader of Opposition. It was totally uncalled for and unjustified. It was deeply offensive, disrespectful, personal and even dangerously inciteful.  People from all over the country have expressed their strong condemnation.

Sir, not only has he demeaned himself personally but also called into question the integrity of our Head of State. His outburst should be unanimously condemned by this honourable House.

We should never condone such contemptuous denigration of our centuries old traditions of parliamentary protocol, propriety and decency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me congratulate you and your Deputy on your elections in these key roles. Given our vanua connections of Cakaudrove, you are also my high chief. Sir, let me assure you that your command shall always be my duty to fulfil, and my loyalty - your right to expect.

Your sense of justice, dignity, humility, integrity, experience, knowledge, and good judgement will, no doubt, usher in a fresh dose of fairness, tolerance, respect for each other and greater order in the conduct of this august house - something that has often been missing during many critical times in the last 16 years.

The example of your power, and the power of your example, shall be a continuing source of inspiration to all of us.

On a personal level, Sir, may I also point out that in you, I also have the privilege of a father. Like many others, I have complete faith and trust in your wisdom and rely on you as a source of good counsel, guidance and advice.

My late parents Mr. & Mrs. Sardar Gurbachan Singh Gosal believed that it was the right and duty of every parent to discipline their children as and when necessary. That right, Sir, I gladly and respectfully confer upon you.

Mr Speaker, whilst I am a proud son of Fiji, I cannot hide my regional bias towards my island home, Vanua Levu. In that respect I wish to most sincerely thank the voters of this region who vested their confidence and trust in me and considered me worthy of their representation.

Sir, 91% of my votes came from the North. For that, I wish to thank you and I will always cherish the moment when you said in Labasa, at the rally of People’s Alliance Party -I quote – “Don’t vote for me, vote for 245 – Charan Jeath Singh” unquote.

I also thank my vanua, my thousands of Itaukei brothers and sisters, the chiefs, villagers, mataqalis, my legion of devoted campaigners and supporters.

My victory belongs more to them, then me and I shall always endeavour to reciprocate their trust.

Mr. Speaker Sir, His Excellency our venerable President has very eloquently outlined the priorities and policies of our Coalition Government of which I am a proud member. His Excellency has rightfully alluded to the many challenges and headwinds that lie ahead for our Government, and our people, and the absolute need for the unity and cooperation of everybody if we are to tackle them.

Despite, the childish and petty refusal by the opposition to accept the verdict of our people, the nation takes great comfort and strength from the reassurance and endorsement of His Excellency in the democratic process. And I quote him -

“I am grateful to note that the change in Government has taken place peacefully and swiftly and the new administration has commenced its work with the mandate of the people.” Unquote.

Mr. Speaker Sir, that mandate and popular support that His Excellency refers to, is the cornerstone of true democracy. Accordingly, there should not be any doubt in the mind of anybody as to the legitimacy of our mandate. Power sharing between our 3 parties, may be a novelty for our country, but it is perfectly legal and constitutional. Such a model of governance and power sharing is the most appropriate prescription for our diverse nation and has been successfully tested in UK, Australia, NZ , Italy , Israel and  our island neighbours.

It promotes greater consultation, consensus, tolerance of other’s needs, transparency, accountability, protection of the rights of the minority and ultimately fosters greater cohesion and stronger pillars of nationhood.

**We are not here**just to warm our seats or to collect our pay and advance our own personal agenda of self-enrichment, power and privileges.

**We are not here to** scam the poor taxpayers through corruption, nepotism and promotion of sectoral policies that favour the minority at the expense of the poor.

High cost of living, unemployment, rampant corruption, low incomes and seriously collapsing health, housing, education, sanitation, water, road infrastructure, **a near terminal sugar industry -** all need our immediate attention.

We are starting just not from a zero base but from an abyss of unprecedented debts, years of chronic fiscal mismanagement and economic carnage of the last 16 years. Undoubtedly, the entire government apparatus was rotten to the core which was worsened by populist policies that were adopted primarily to gain political capital. Masking the true state of key sectors such as sugar industry had become a norm. Without a shadow of doubt, we were reaching the edge of the tipping point.

**But let me assure our fellow citizens.**We will be very forthright and work strenuously and decisively to rebuild and bolster our socio-economic pillars. Our approach is bottoms up and people-centered and not bottom down model of imposition.

**We are here to serve and not to be served.**We are here to be directed by people and not to dictate to them. We are here to listen and learn and not to lecture from the prism of arrogance and bigotry.

We will make sure of that **Adhyaksh Mahoday**, Mr. Speaker Sir.

Sir, I made a conscious decision to return to this House after 23 years.

Indeed, as I look around, I can say that I am the only member of this House who has previously been in parliament with our current Prime Minister Rabuka.

Both of us were in parliament together between 1994-1999, although on different sides of the political aisle.

Together with hundreds of thousands of our people of all ethnic communities, from the rural poor and urban areas, the struggling farmers, the workers, the middle class and those trapped in poverty, the unemployed and those low paid, those thousands suffering from lack of basic health, housing, education, water and sanitation facilities, I have seen the wholesale betrayal of the last 16 years.

In the face of their glaring incompetence, failures and reckless mismanagement of the country, none of us could afford to sit on the side lines and not contribute to its immediate recovery and turnaround. Our country and our people needed to be rescued from this crisis and carnage caused by that side of the House.

The sheer magnitude and crippling nature of the challenge compels all of us to join hands and work in a unified, inclusive and forward-looking manner for the common good of our beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I took that as my foremost duty and moral responsibility to offer my energy and resources to save our nation from drowning further in that fatal vortex of debts and distress inflicted by one man’s ignorance and obsessive sense of self-importance.

The pace at which our national debt was building up is certainly dreadful. Clearly the past government’s development model was an utter failure as state borrowing was employed as a main driver to fuel economic growth and fiscal stabilization, which logically is not sustainable at all - burdening Fiji’s population – current and those yet to be born with loads of debt.

Sir, I am thankful to our PM for the faith and trust he has placed in me as his Minister for Sugar and Multi Ethnic affairs. I may be the first Sugar Minister, who is an experienced cane farmer also, but I will not stop listening and learning from the 12,000 cane farmers representing the industry.

Just to give you the scale of degradation of this once glorious industry and our main economic lifeline, let me share some key statistics.

1. Our cane production has declined by half from 3.2 million tons in 2006 to about 1.7 million tons today.
2. For the last 14 years from 2006- 2020, the accumulated loss of FSC has been about half a billion.
3. The number of farmers has declined from 18,600 to about 12,000.
4. It has lost its prominent economic position down to about 4% of the GDP.
5. Under this sleeping Minister, it has been treated like an orphaned child and the exodus continues.
6. Under his watch, the key institutions of the industry such as the Sugarcane Growers Council, and Sugar Commission have been dismantled without any consultations with any party.
7. Our milling efficiencies, farming practices and incomes, employee welfare, transport infrastructures, mill machinery have all been run to the ground with a Sugar Minister, who, as I have said, has been “sleeping on the job” unaware of his responsibilities.
8. His glaring incompetence and mismanagement has destroyed, a once beacon of our economy for the last 150 years, to a pathetic unrecognisable shadow of its past. The industry suffers from a massive loss of confidence, cloaked in a maze of lies and recklessness.
9. This man in 2009 rejected the EU offer of $300 million only because he would not commit to a perfectly achievable timetable for holding democratic elections. For him and his advisors the continuation of his dictatorship was worth more than that large sum of money to help our farmers and the industry.
10. All this happened while the senior executives of FSC treated themselves to obscene salaries, benefits and corrupt conflict of interests.  To all of them the sleeping minister had only one answer- ONGOING INVESTIGATIONS!

However, Sir, we are determined to restore the industry, in the fullness of time and with the cooperation and goodwill of the stakeholders.

**Ab samay aa gaya hai, Adhyaksh Mahoday, ki hum sab milkar is desh ko Prashant ka swarg banayein.**

The time has come, Mr. Speaker Sir, that together we make this country a paradise of the Pacific.

In conclusion Sir, I send my warm greetings and “Shubh Kamnayein” (Best wishes)  to all our people and assure them of our best efforts to govern in the interests of just not selected few, but all .

May our country and all its peoples continue to be blessed forever.

Thank you Sir !